Book Section:
Favell, A orcid.org/0000-0001-5801-6847 (2017) Aida Makoto: Notes from an Apathetic Continent. In: Freedman, A and Slade, T, (eds.) Introducing Japanese Popular Culture. Routledge , Abingdon, Oxon, UK . ISBN 9781138852105

Aida Makoto: Notes from an Apathetic Continent

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forthcoming in
Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade (eds.)
Introducing Japanese Popular Culture (Routledge 2017)

In the wake of the huge international success of Murakami Takashi's (born 1962) Superflat movement (see Tom Looser's chapter in this volume), Japanese contemporary art during the first decade of the twenty-first century was mostly represented internationally by Murakami and artists associated with his style, such as Nara Yoshitomo (born 1959). The dominant frame of Superflat art poses an issue about the rival claims of Murakami's close contemporary, Aida Makoto (born 1965) who, among inner art circles in Japan, is often mentioned as the most representative artist to emerge during the 1990s. Edgy, erratic, and extraordinarily diverse in his production, Aida is often seen by even his most fervent admirers as an artist for domestic consumption only, too complex in his self-referential Japaneseness to be easily translated (Yamashita 2012). Yet in the context of this volume, his *oeuvre* deserves close attention as it taps into live—often quite unpalatable—aspects of Japanese popular culture, articulating ambiguous commentary on attitudes, events, and politics going well beyond the much more commercial and exportable style of Superflat.

Accordingly, this chapter provides an introduction to Aida's work, exploring central themes such as his satirical use of images of young girls and trashy downtown salaryman culture ("salaryman," or "man who earns a salary," is the common Japanese term for "businessman"), his prolific art historical reference points and techniques, his sporadic but often nihilistic forays into politics—including the theme of homelessness, and the resonance of his work after the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear triple disaster of March 2011 (i.e., "post-3/11"). It also foregrounds the thorny question—self-consciously posed by Aida himself in numerous ironic works—of whether his *oeuvre* will ever gain international recognition and sympathy he enjoys at home.

Edible Girls and Old Guys' Jokes

Questionably distasteful as they may be, highlights from the series *Edible Artificial Girls: Mi-Mi chan* (Shokuyō jinzō shōjo: Mi-Mi chan, 2001) are representative Aida works. Aida is a conceptual artist who executes his ideas in a vast range of different media, which often display his remarkable powers of pastiche and satire. This series, begun in 1999, consists of a number of sketched drawings and illustrations, some of which were eventually made into plastic models and installations. In a traditional-style commercial note to accompany the works, which mimics precisely the ingenuous tone of Japanese corporate marketing, Aida explains how world food shortages necessitated the development of a range of artificially cultivated miniature edible girls, who can be served in a range of classical-style Japanese *izakaya* (pub food) dishes:

> Mi-Mi, who can be your good companion or kept in food storage, has taken a firm hold within our lifestyle in the role of a pet. With the great development of new flavors, we can now count on more than five thousand varieties of Mi-Mi. Mi-Mi provides most of the food on Earth... the bad habit of eating the meat of farm animals died out... We are pleased to offer a good time from the hand skilled bio-confectioners handed down since our foundation (Quoted in Aida 2007: 94).

A cheerful salaryman—with a distinct resemblance to the former Japanese Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro (2000-2001)—is seen devouring one *oishiisō* (delicious looking) girl cooked in tempura; in another, a loving chef's hands squeeze out bright orange roe from between a girl's legs. Sushi, *nabe* hot pot, and grilled versions, of course, are on the menu. Mimi-chan is sweet and adorably "cute": we could very well imagine these images alongside the endless barrage of smiling young and seductive female faces adorning free sales magazines or metro advertisements, which bombard weary commuters in any major Japanese city. It is a grotesque, queasy and distinctly pornographic satire served up by the "restaurant owner" Aida. On one level, it is just another *oyaji* (old guy's) joke, familiar from many other male artists of Aida's generation. On another—particularly in a society where women parliamentarians get laughed at and shouted down when they make speeches about supporting child care and working women[1]—Aida's work can be read as an acute and brutal auto-diagnosis of gender relations and representations of exploitable "girls" as an abundant raw material in Japanese popular culture (on this, see especially Kinsella 2014)..

Much of Aida's work plays along this borderline (Saito 2008), defying prurient censorship while revelling in the resources provided by the everyday popular culture of Tokyo's *shitamachi* (downtown) working men's entertainment zones. This is not the "Cool Japan" cliché of Tokyo's young, fashionable Shibuya Crossing intersection or Harajuku shopping area—however weird and wonderful that may be—but the irretrievably "uncool" reality of backstreet male popular culture in urban Japan everywhere. It is what you see, not so much in the otaku paradise of Tokyo's Akihabara district (see Patrick Galbrath's chapters in this volume), but just up the road in the down-at-heel salaryman playground of the downtown Ueno neighborhood. J-Pop has sold to the world a stylized image of a fantasy Tokyo—"neo-Tokyo" as it is often referred to—whereas Aida presents a much more realist, albeit sometimes sordid, vision of "real Tokyo" (Favell 2014a). Aida is thus a much better guide to the everyday culture of the metropolis than much of Japan's more commercial pop art. A good example of this is the *Monument for Nothing III* (2009): an enormous wall jigsaw bricolage in the shape of a traditional Japanese rake. It is like many of Aida's works, a splurge of bile: full of images of cartoon girls, vomit-looking food, tacky billboard images, and drunken revellers. Aida presents his spin on this culture with a characteristically blank, nihilistic irony, laughing sheepishly, unshaven and hung over, with a can of Sapporo beer or a cigarette in hand.

Aida's frank exploitation of female bodies—usually nubile young women in a manga-like, and sometimes grotesque style—immediately opens himself up to hostile critique. However routine these kinds of images are in public in Japan, such jokes are indefensible in any serious discussion about the place of women in Japan and could easily be read as symptomatic of much that is wrong with contemporary Japan. But as art they demand an appreciation of how well and how consistently Aida strikes a raw nerve in his representations, while always keeping his ultimate position elusive (Kinsella 2014). Some of Murakami's Superflat, particularly his Svengali-like promotion of cute "teenager"-style girls

[1] This refers to an incident at the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly in June 2014 when a female politician was heckled during a speech urging more support for pregnant women. The incident was reported internationally as a new nadir in Japanese gender relations.

artists with his production company Kaikai Kiki, comes out of similar sources. But Murakami's games with girl culture, the weirder aspects of Akihabaru, or nationalist politics always err on the palatable side. In order to make those big international auction sales, Superflat consistently turned Japanese hardcore into Japanese kitsch. Aida's work, in contrast, is always over the line: raucous, ugly, and in your face, like the crows in Tokyo's Yoyogi Park at sundown (Tokyo has a particular problem with its out of control crow population). And, unlike Murakami or Nara, who are "fun" but never really humorous in their work, Aida is uproariously funny—to those that see the (bitter, twisted) joke.

Global Parallels in Bad Taste

The most obvious international reference for Aida would be the mischievous Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan or the YBA (Young British Artists) bad boys, the Chapman Brothers. The 1990s Tokyo art scene, led by the young Murakami alongside others, was a direct parallel to the London art explosion led by Damian Hirst. The Chapman Brothers provided the most obscene, if not always the most scandalous, riffs on bad taste, whether it involved prosthetic genitalia on plastic children, or vast dioramas of model Nazis killing each other. Aida has been successfully paired with them (Kubota 2004), but it is telling that gallerists and collectors who have revelled in the British sensation would never go near Aida's similarly incendiary work. Aida perhaps references a true, and quite authentic, Japanese national culture of which few viewers internationally want to be reminded.

Perhaps his greatest works, made in a rush of inspiration during and after the disastrous national "zero year" of 1995—in which a huge earthquake in Kobe was followed by the Aum Shinryo sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway—are the *War Picture Returns* series (Sensōga RETURNS, 1995-1999). Executed on traditional Japanese sliding screens (*fusuma*), several of them display Aida's academic mastery of *nihonga* techniques: that is, Japanese painting in a "traditional" style and materials as was defined and institutionalised in the Meiji period (particularly by the scholar Okakura Kakuzō [1862-1913], author of the *Book of Tea* [1906]), and in contrast to *yōga*, which is Japanese painting executed in a "modern" European style. Others borrow the heavy social realist style of canonical wartime army paintings by artists such as Foujita Tsuguhara (1986-1968). Taken together, the series pokes an offensive needle in the eye of both Japanese nationalism and its triumphant foreign nemesis, American civilization (Mouri 2006). In one (*Beautiful Flag* [Utsukushii hata], 1995), appropriating typical fetishistic images but also referencing classical works, Aida restages Japanese and Korean schoolgirls standing in mock heroic poses with their respective flags against a war torn backdrop; in another (*Gate Ball*, 1999), decrepit, cartoonish representatives of East Asian economic cooperation play a game of croquet through temple gates with severed heads on a map of the region. In another (*A Picture of an Air Raid on New York City* [Nyōyōku kuubaku no zu], 1996), he imagines a Möbius strip of triumphant Mitsubishi Zeros bombing a burning American skyline, evoking both classical flying cranes and Edo era overviews of Kyoto (Yamashita 2014: 195). This last painting, Aida's most (in)famous, even earned him the reputation as a kind of millennial soothsayer: executed in 1996, then shown to a dismayed public at the Whitney Museum in New York in 2003, in a provocative post 9/11 show about anti-Americanism. Aida has often been eerily prescient of world shattering moments, although he stresses it is just a coincidence (Kondo 2011): he painted a sarin bottle in one of Ozawa Tsuyoshi's milk box Nasubi galleries in 1994, one year before the terrorist attack; his *Ash Color Mountains* (2009-2011, discussed below), looks sickeningly familiar after the television footage from Tōhoku (Northeast Japan) after the March 2011 disasters. Taken together, the *War Picture Returns*, which was shown in its entirely as the centerpiece of Sawaragi Noi's epoch defining *Ground Zero Japan* show at Mito Art Tower in 1999, is as acute a psychoanalysis of Japan's Asian and Pacific psychosis

as could be imagined. The series even gains strength from being didactic work, propped up like information posters on empty beer crates. Yet it is a dialogue with the Japanese nation, which has little or no resonance on a Western art market that expensively canonizes the Chapman Brothers' obsessions with Nazis or Maurizio Cattelan's sordid jokes about Hitler and the Pope.

Aida's difficulties internationally pose the question of whether any contemporary Japanese artist can pass into the Japanese pantheon of world-class artists without the affirmation of "*gaisen kōen*": the "triumphant return performance" after success and recognition abroad (Favell 2015). In one way or another, with minor variation, it is the same story for famous artists from an older generation—for example, Kusama Yayoi (born 1929) and Ono Yoko (born 1933)—or Mori Mariko (born 1967) and Nara Yoshitomo from Aida's. All grew bigger via international affirmation. It was a route to stardom systematized, of course, by Murakami Takashi in his frankly cynical *Art Entrepreneurship Theory* (Geijustsu kigyo ron, 2005). Aida's career seems an exception. He had a very negative and fruitless stay in New York in 2000, as he often discusses, unlike Murakami who made his name working in New York and Los Angeles. Instead, Aida has become, curiously, a kind of people's champion as the quintessential "national" artist back home. Much of his work plays on these ambiguities: of being Japanese, of loving and hating Japan, and of finding an authentic way of translating international and essentially alien art currents into Japanese form. In this, as well as in his ambiguous populist politics, Aida shows much of the influence of his youthful fascination with the writer Mishima Yukio (1925-1970), whose nationalist obsession with classical heritage, the painful modernization of Japan, and its subordination to the United States in the postwar period, gripped him as a teenager (Kataoka 2012: 35).

Academic and Historical References

Born in the northern prefecture of Niigata to a sociologist father and a science teacher mother, Aida had an apparently normal childhood. Geeky and shy of girls, he went to study oil painting at the Tokyo University of the Arts (Geidai) in the mid-1980s, graduating from his MFA in 1991 and part of a dynamic group of young artists centred on Murakami from the school (Favell 2014b). Acclaim followed on the Tokyo art scene very soon after. As Aida's works eminently display, he is a master of historical reference: to classical works or traditional techniques and materials (often self-made, such as pigments, canvases, paper, or improvised trash), as well as to a range of internationally legible contemporary conceptual tricks. The hollowness or incompleteness of his mastery is often foregrounded: there is a slightly despairing sense in his bravura performance of old-fashioned skills—such as the piles of minutely etched human bodies that make up massive set piece paintings like *Blender* (2001)—even as he denies really being a painter. He publicly complains of being unable to finish his prolific ideas (*Mukiryoku tairiku* 2003).

Aida's technical skill and range is undisputed. One of his earliest works, *The Path through the Rice Fields* (AZEMICHI, 1991), always appeals to layman audiences—the painting is even used in Japanese art history textbooks. With photo-like precision, the young Aida painted the back of a schoolgirl's head, an image he conceived as a student idly looking at the nape of his girlfriend's neck. Re-imagined in a sailor-style school uniform, the parting in her bunched hair blends into a path through rice fields that recedes from the viewer into a sentimental (but crumbling) rural landscape. This was the work which convinced gallerist Mitsuma Sueo to sign him on the spot, for his growing Mizuma Gallery; it had a similar effect for many in the Japanese art world (see Yamashita 2014: 192), such is its pointed appropriation at once of Japanese art history, the iconography of national landscapes, and of contemporary subculture. The painting, another joke, is a self-referential and academic exercise quoting a famous *nihonga* painting of a path through rice fields by Higashiyama

Kaii (1908-1999), a famous postwar work that symbolized an alternative path for Japanese art free of the invasive influence of American power (Larking 2013). Aida's path similarly seeks a Japanese path through the false globalism of recent international art theory. That World War II is still on his mind is quite typical of his generation, who grew up much too young to know the war, but alive to their parents' early memories. These 1960s children also grew up gorging on American popular culture and experienced the consumer craze of the 1980s as young adults, but they continue to share the ambiguous left-right nationalist resentments of older generations. Again, the mood is familiar in many artists of Aida's age: the same undertow can be found in Murakami's and occasionally Nara's work. It is, however, absent in the generations of artists who came of age after Japan's boom years ended in 1990.

Murakami and Aida respect each other but keep a distance. The one work of Aida's placed in Murakami's first international Superflat show in Los Angeles (2001) had the effect of distorting Aida's later reception internationally: his obviously otaku style painting, *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Gidora* (*Kyodai Fuji tai'in VS kingu gidora*, 1993). This utterly sensational, 20-square-meter manga image, executed in blown-up acetate and bright color acrylic, depicts in mock mythological style, an agonized Fuji (Japan?) being raped by a cartoon monster (the United States?). It is, obviously, a "neo-Japoniste" work: that is, a work like some of Murakami's, which references a classic work from the Edo period in the manner "Japoniste" modern European art incorporated traditional Japanese styles in the late nineteenth century. Underneath, as a template, is Hokusai's famous *shunga* (erotic woodblock prints made during the Edo era) of an octopus copulating with a fisherwoman. When unveiled by the influential curator/writer Nishihara Min at Ikeuchi Tsutomu's Roentgen Institute in early 1993, a phenomenal new raw talent was immediately recognized on the Tokyo scene (Nakazawa 2014: 88-89; Favell 2012: 96).

Unfortunately, squashed into Murakami's parade of young girl artists and commercial graphic art in Superflat, Aida was saddled with the label of being a manga or otaku artist (Aida 2012: 97). For sure, he has those references: almost automatic, it is said, among the clever nerdy otaku boys born in the 1960s, sat at home with their sci-fi toys and grubby manga (Sawaragi 2005). The media has occasionally suited him: for example, the stunning *dōjinshi* (homemade) manga *Mutant Hanako* (1997)—unknown in English but a cult to French manga specialists—which first existed in the form of three-hundred cheaply photocopied and stapled comic books sold at his gallery, then executed as part of the *War Picture Returns* series on hinged screens. In a full-length story, Aida retells the narrative of the Pacific War with the United States though a spectacularly pornographic and scatological tale of a Japanese schoolgirl, Hanako, given monstrous powers from her exposure to radiation during the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Released as a superhero, she reverses history, after suffering the ignoble abuse of various American military figures, including General MacArthur, and the loss of her lover, a doomed Kamikaze pilot. This avatar of modern Japan saves the nation from defeat in the war through an outer-space sci-fi ending. Badly drawn, with much evidence of long feverish nights at work, it is another masterpiece of commentary on the psychosis of the nation. Later, in a half-baked attempt to translate the work abroad in San Francisco, Aida and his friends produced a comical dubbed version with cheap stop-start animation and terrible accents. For Aida, it fulfilled a long held desire to draw and publish an erotic manga, however unprofessionally executed: "Why am I so obsessed with erotic things? It is because I believe deeply that 'bad taste,' in its broadest definition, is one of manga's most fundamental sources of power" (Aida 2005: 24).

This work was a pivotal moment in Aida's career. His gallerist Mitsuma—who has always acted as a patient patron for an artist he is convinced is the greatest of his generation—showed the manga-covered screens to a new collector, Takahashi Ryutaro, a medical psychiatrist who thought it was perfect piece for his office. It was the start of

Takahashi's definitive collection of the 1990s and 2000s pop and neo-Japoniste art that had not already been snapped up—like the Japoniste masterpieces of a previous era—by overseas collectors (again, principally the most important works of Murakami and Nara). Aida is the centerpiece of the Takahashi's collection, meaning that his works have stayed in Japan and have been accessible to frequent and ever larger showings at home. Internationally, though, Aida has been less visible. After appearing the second iteration of Superflat, *Coloriage* in Paris (2002), Aida was subsequently airbrushed to the margins of Murakami's post-1980s history of Japanese contemporary art in *Little Boy*, shown at Japan Society in New York in 2005 (Murakami 2005). This hugely influential show and catalogue became the dominant reference point in defining the art of the 1990s from Japan internationally. Recently, this history has started to be challenged (Favell 2014b), for example by curator David Elliott's (2011) revisionist *Bye Bye Kitty!!!* at the same venue. Elliott disposed of the cheesy cartoons and "cute" art by young girl artists associated with Superflat and Kaikai Kiki and instead put Aida upfront and central. In the imposing entrance gallery, Aida's "hell"—his elegant, yet shocking classical oriental painting of huge misty mountains of discarded (dead?) salarymen's bodies and computers (*Ash Color Mountains* [Haiiro no yama], 2009-2011)—was counterposed to the "heaven" of feminist photographer Yanagi Miwa's (born 1967) utopian photostories of young Japanese women imagining their liberated future selves in their sixties and seventies (*My Grandmothers*, 2002-2009).

In Japan, Aida was widely seen as the outstanding artist of the 1990s: as suggested, for example, by the leading Japanese art magazine *Bijutsu Techo* (Art Notebook) in its end of decade special (December 1999). Since then, his steadily rising domestic recognition led eventually to a career-defining retrospective curated by Kataoka Mami at Tokyo's Mori Art Museum at the end of 2012 (Aida 2012). It also made Aida an odd kind of countercultural public hero for the anxious dark days after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear meltdown. Because of his incendiary reputation, many corporations would not touch the show with sponsorship, so Mitsuma resorted to crowd sourcing, making an Internet-based call for supporters large and small to underwrite the show. Disaster was predicted (Corkill 2012), but the funding was realized. Large attendances at this sprawling, deliberately chaotic show further grew when, belatedly, a scandal blew up over the curtained-off room in which Kataoka had put Aida's most unpleasant works: the sickly sweet paintings of smiling, amputated *bishōjo* (beautiful girls) of his notorious *DOG* series. Predictably, a certain portion of wider discussion about Aida focuses on his own fairly frank *lolicon* (Lolita complex) with young girls in his art, a motif to which Aida has continually returned. When asked about his own attitude to his often shocking imagery, he says he has an effete—or "womanish", as he puts it—rather than macho, personality, and he often imagines himself as one of the *bishōjo* he is painting:

> Recently I was making a work of forty middle-school-aged girls playing in a waterfall, and, as I was drawing, I started to feel as if I were each girl. So that perhaps creates a distinctive atmosphere. But also because of this unpleasant reason, it is not the same as the line of vision as a man wanting to possess the girl. Maybe I want to cut off my legs or become a girl and frolic in the waterfall at the level of fantastic imagination (interview in Kinsella 2014:166).

A further complication in assessing the misogyny that could easily be read into these paintings is the open collaboration he engages in with his wife Okada Hiroko (born 1970). Also a Mizuma Gallery artist, she directs the alternative puppet theatre troupe, Gekidan ★ Shiki, (Shiki Theater Company) of which Aida is a central member, and herself practices an arguably feminist-style work with a similar black humor to Aida's, with installations and videos satirizing women's roles in Japan. Along with their computer prodigy teenage soon, Torajiro, the Aida family as a whole courted further scandal at Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art (MOT) in Autumn 2015. In a "family" group show—ostensibly aimed

at children—Okada's satirical videos were paired, among other works, with a ridiculing video impersonation by Aida of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (in office in 2006 and again from 2012) making a speech about Japanese "sakoku" (the historical national closure to the world experienced by Japan before the modern era), and a poster banner by their son denouncing the conformist stupidity of the Japanese education system. Once again, Aida was threatened with censorship and closure after a public complaint, although the show remained up.

Politics in an Apathetic Continent

The surprise success of Aida's Mori Art Museum show demonstrated that a wide Japanese audience was able to appreciate and understand some of what the artist was articulating without, for the most part, the kind of tabloid shock that would accompany this kind of show in Great Britain or the United States. For reasons surely to do with timing, Aida more than ever assumed the role of the beloved entertainer voicing sarcastic intellectual despair. While politicians have voiced a resurgent nationalism during the more belligerent rule of Prime Minister Abe, Aida's show reflected the black mood of a Tokyo living tensely in the unquantified mist of post-Fukushima radiation. In this, perhaps most effective were the near outsider art of the cheap and tacky *All Together Now* (Minna to issho, starting 2002) sketched posters, which randomly voice Aida's reactions to the absurdities of Japanese politics and morals. In one of the later ones, *Optical Illusion around 13th March 2011* (2011 nen 3 gatsu 13 nichi atari no genshi, 2011), he bitterly pictures a corporate fantasy in which robot men and dogs are set to work to quickly repair the exploded Fukushima reactor in a model of 1980s world-beating Japanese efficiency, of the kind supposedly epitomized by global technology leaders like Sony or Toyota. In a country ruled by bottled up self-censorship and byzantine modes of self-abnegation—for example, the stifling social norms referred to my so many young Japanese who escape to live and work abroad especially in the 1990s (Kelsky 2001; Sooudi 2014)—Aida voices without fear the backstage home truths everyone knows and hears outside of formal hierarchies and institutions. Read this way, it is fleetingly possible to imagine him as the post-pop art voice of 1960s radical art reborn for a more cynical age. In an another throwaway style series, *Posters* (1984), he brilliantly parodies the heavy handed moral messages of public safety posters that elementary school children in Japan are sometimes forced to paint in class to reinforce good everyday collective behaviour.

Yet Aida has never really stepped up to the plate politically: his vision has always been of an "apathetic continent," an anti-everything nihilism. It is an odd kind of politics, but perhaps appropriate for an advanced highly-developed nation in which democratic politics for many has become an alienating and distant spectator sport (Kingston 2012). On the other hand, Aida's influence has been highly visible in the now hugely successful art of younger and more overtly political generation who have worked closely with him as teacher and mentor (Favell 2012). Once Aida's assistants, there is Chim⇧Pom, whose post 3/11 interventions—supplementing graffiti onto the anti-nuclear work of Okamoto Tarō (1911-1996) in Shibuya Station and breaking into the Fukushima site to make new works—have been presented as a kind of anarchistic art evoking the 1960s Situationist art movement in Paris (Worrall 2012); similarly, there is Endo Ichiro (born 1979), who has become an emblematic figure in the post-3/11 period, touring around Japan in distinctive hand-painted yellow vans with the community message of hope *Mirai e!* (Go for Future!).

Aida's one obvious engagement has been on the issue of middle-aged male homelessness. These are his "brown" works, finding beauty out of cardboard and trash. There was the centerpiece of his contribution to the Yokohama Triennale in 2001: the mock Jackson Pollack rendering of a tramp's "naive art" using rotting tatami mats, and found junk, (Untitled 2001, sometimes refered to in English as *Homeless on the Arakawa River*); and the laughably epic cardboard *Shinjuku Castle* (Shinjuku jō 1995), an old samurai-style castle that

was installed in an underpass in the shadow of the skyscrapers of the West Shinjuku financial and government district for the local homeless to live in. Aida's political wit has also been visible in video works: for example, a work that would be worthy of the best British television satire, *A Video of a Man Calling Himself Bin Laden Staying in Japan* (Nihon ni senpukuchuu no Bin Laden to nanoru otoko karano bideo, 2005). In this, set in the comfort of a rural *ryokan* (Japanese-style inn) with copious alcohol and *izakaya* dishes, Aida himself acts out Bin Laden, mellowing out and renouncing violence, while he muses about the world events he has influenced. The idea came to Aida after some friends told him with a grey beard he was starting to look like the Al-Qaeda leader.

Laughter in Lost Translations

The point about Aida in many of the works discussed above is, in effect, the hardest thing to translate: the rambunctious, slapstick, spiteful, and sometimes plain silly humor found in nearly all his works, which takes its cue from Japanese stand-up variety shows or television comedy traditions, known as *owarai*. A case in point is another video work, unveiled at the large Shōwa 40-nen kai (The Group 1965) group show in Düsseldorf in 2011. The Group 1965 is a gang of Aida's close artist friends, including the social and relational conceptualist Ozawa Tsuyoshi, a trashy pop-style photographer Matsukage Hiroyuki, a manga artist Kinoshita Parco, electronics master Arima Sumihisa, and the sweet and nostalgic painter Oiwa Oscar. Their only unifying *raison d'être* is that they were *all* born in the (thereby self-evidently) momentous year, 1965, the fortieth year of the reign of the Showa Emperor. Together, with Aida, they celebrate the absurd side of Japanese popular culture, as well as a bitter nostalgia for its disappearing traditional urban landscapes: for example, of old *shokudo* (dining bars), *sentō* (bathing houses), and *kissaten* (coffee houses).

Aida's video for Düsseldorf, *Art and Philosophy #2* (Bijutsu to tetsugaku #2, 2010), was one of his most trenchant commentaries yet on the "lost in translation" problem that seems to doom him to cult status internationally. He has before made fun of this, such as his intransigent refusal to make translations of some his works, which he commented on at Yokohama in 2001 by hanging a Japanese-English dictionary next to the works for puzzled foreigners. In a closed room, on three simultaneous video screens, Aida performs, in costume, a live painting on glass by three stereotypical German, French, and English artists. As they paint, a typical "national" style work appears, while each of Aida's characters mouth philosophical and art theoretical statements in their native languages—each with a terrible Japanese accent. The German artist, intense and erratic, seems to be some kind of Anselm Kiefer figure, filling the screen with heavy and lumpy brown paint. The French artist, romantic and fey, dabs impressionistically at the screen, while smoking a Gauloise brand cigarette. The Anglo-American artist, meanwhile, starts out as an Oxbridge gentleman quoting Ludwig Wittgenstein and painting geometric abstractions. By the end, he has turned into an angry postmodern theorist, painting obscenities, reminiscent of Damien Hirst. The message here for young Japanese art students is how meaningless all these pretentious Western art theory references have become in this context. Perhaps a better association for Aida among the YBAs would be Tracey Emin: difficult, perverse, emotional, funny, impenetrably British. Indeed, Aida even looks a little like her in his transvestite photographic work, *Self Portrait: A Girl of Sea Breezes* (Shiokaze no shōjo, 1989).

The reference in the video work, as in many others, is to Immanuel Kant: the eighteenth-century philosopher who laid out for all time the universal sources of beauty in human judgement in his *Critique on Aesthetic Judgement* (1790). Twentieth century critical philosophy, from Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche to Michel Foucault and Edward Said, was supposed to have made impossible this kind of belief in the transcendental sublime. Yet global curators marched all over the planet during the 1990s and 2000s, armed with

clever postcolonial theories, while in practice assuming a facile universalism, in which they could recognize, select and put value on works in every country, after a just few interviews with key art world figures (Stallabrass 2004). Thankfully, Aida has never been much understood by these curators; he has not been colonized. He is not so much a nationalist, as obdurately resistant to such globalist processing. He has always spoken of this as a kind of self-defeating mechanism: the last laugh of the "apathetic continent"; the "monument for nothing".

Murakami's Superflat movement on the other hand triumphed because it was the perfect vision of Japan to market during the heady years before the global financial crisis of 2008, in which "flat world" globalism seemed to be all triumphant (Friedman 2005). Superflat succeeded by reducing the Japanese nation to cartoon images and a simple digital code: easy to consume, like salmon sushi, for those looking for an imaginary "Cool Japan." But, as the gloss on Murakami's smiley flowers begins to pall, it is not surprising that the world has started looking for other visions of Japan, more in tune with a darker, more complex political and economic moment. The global era of the 1990s and 2000s is over; nations and their perverse, peculiar cultures and misunderstandings will just not go away. Aida paid little attention to the globalist fashions and ambitions that drove Superflat to success and so now stands as a much better guide to what happened in and to Japan since 1990. As the funniest man in Japanese art and a much loved vaudevillian mainstay of the inner Tokyo art world, many artists, curators and students in Japan have been ready to follow Aida, despite the frequent bad taste and sometime duff works that pepper his catalogues. For them, he has been the artist who best expresses their world, in all its beauty and joy, frustration and bile. Aida, meanwhile shows little sign of repenting or changing course: articulating the squeamish discomforts of the Japanese condition, with a shrug and a wry laugh, while blithely awaiting an international recognition which may or may not someday arrive.

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